

Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington D.C. 20554

In the Matter of)
)
Telecommunications Relay Services)
And Speech-to-Speech Services for) CC Docket No.
98-67
Individuals with Hearing and Speech)
Disabilities)

COMMENTS OF LYDIA ESQUEDA

I am writing to ask the FCC to approve video relay services between American Sign Language (ASL) users and people who speak Spanish as a reimbursable relay service. I am submitting these comments in support of the petitions for reconsideration filed by Communication Service for the Deaf on September 30, 2004 and Hands On Video Relay Service on October 1, 2004.

As a deaf member of the Latino community in Texas, I wish to have the ability to communicate in my native language, which is ASL, with other members of the Texas Spanish speaking community who are not deaf. In addition, I would like to be able to use the telephone to communicate with deaf Latinos that I know in other states. Video relay services provides the only way that I can effectively communicate by phone with my friends and relatives. Text relay is not effective because my preferred language is ASL, not English. Text relay is also very slow, and does not allow me to share emotions such as laughter, sadness or anger with other parties to the conversation.

The Texas Latino community is very large, and this population is continuing to grow. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Hispanic and Latino Texans comprise more than 32% of the State's population (6,669,666 people statewide), and are quickly approaching a majority of the population in many of our cities. As a matter of fact, the American Latino population is approaching 40 million people throughout the United States, with particularly heavy concentrations in California, New York, and Florida. Puerto Rico, which also must provide relay services, is nearly all Spanish speaking. Deaf people like me who use ASL want and need to be able to communicate by phone with these hearing Latino Americans in our native language.

The FCC already requires interstate relay services to be in Spanish. The FCC created this requirement because it recognized that the Spanish speaking population is substantially larger than any other non-English speaking population in America. It realized that unless it mandated this type of service, millions of deaf, hard of hearing, and speech disabled people who spoke Spanish might be denied functionally equivalent relay service. It is now time for the FCC to extend this mandate to VRS technology. The only way to do that is to require ASL translation to the Spanish language.

VRS conversations between ASL users and Spanish speakers is no different than VRS conversations between ASL users and English speakers. Both types of conversations involve translation from a visual language (ASL) to a verbal language (English or Spanish).

As CSD has stated in its petition, "allowing reimbursement for this VRS feature will enable millions of deaf Americans who use ASL as their primary language to communicate by phone in the manner that best meets their communication needs with millions of Spanish speaking Americans - a result clearly dictated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)."

ASL has a grammatical structure that is very different than English. When ASL is interpreted into Spanish, it is not the same thing as translating English into Spanish. It appears that the FCC has already recognized that ASL and English are two different languages and that communication between these two languages needs interpretation over VRS. But if the FCC is going to allow VRS calls between ASL users and English speaking individuals, it should also allow calls between ASL users and Spanish speaking individuals, because we make up the largest minority in the United States.

Video relay services between deaf children who use ASL and their parents who speak Spanish is especially critical. Many deaf Latino children never learn Spanish because they go off to schools for the deaf, where their primary language becomes ASL.

Unfortunately, many parents of these children never learn sign language. VRS offers the first, and only way that these children can have telephone conversations with their parents. Even the Latino deaf children who do know some Spanish typically cannot type well enough to have a traditional text telephone conversation with their family members.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide you with these comments, and I urge you to give us, the deaf Latino community, the ability to communicate in our native language by telephone, as the Americans with Disabilities Act requires.

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